

Students Learn The Trade At Universal Music & Art

BY MOIRA McCORMICK

CHICAGO—Tucked in a storefront in the heart of the notoriously tough Humboldt Park neighborhood, Universal Music & Art Shop is a music retail store like no other in Chicago. It is a fully operational business, but it is owned and operated by the not-for-profit social service agency Youth Service Project (YSP). The store offers paid internships to high school students, training them in everything from customer-service skills to inventory control. The ultimate goal is to make them well-prepared for and able to participate in the job market.

According to G. Sequane Lawrence, YSP's CEO, the 25-year-old agency was founded "to help youths with substance-abuse problems." Over the years, YSP's focus expanded into what Lawrence calls more entrepreneurial, market-driven programs and youth-centered activities. "Hence, the music store," he says, "Music is more attractive to kids than any other art form."

Lawrence secured initial capital to open Universal Music & Art from the Chicago Community Loan Fund. YSP already owned the storefront, a 1,000 square-foot space adjacent to YSP's offices that had not been in use for some time. The time from when Lawrence first conceived of the store, he says, to the official opening was a scant two months (October to December 1999). "It took a lot of teamwork and energy," says Lawrence.

The store's teenage staffers selected its vivid color scheme—lavender, pink, sky blue, mint green, and darker blue—as well as the Art Deco lettering that adorns the oval signs denoting musical genres. A purple and green neon sign that harmonizes with the décor alerts passers-by to the store's presence.

Local distributor Latin American Music supplied the 300-piece capacity, stair-step wire fixtures, and all Latin music product, Lawrence says. Baker & Taylor wholesales all other genres, including R&B, hip-hop, dance, reggae, soundtracks and jazz—some 1,500 CD titles and 200-plus cassette titles in all. "There's no other store stocking music like this in the area," notes Lawrence, referring to Humboldt Park's predominantly Hispanic make-up. "Most of the other record stores are [much smaller] and carry 100% Latin music."

New releases sell "slightly below list, to stay competitive," says Lawrence—typically \$15.99 for a release that lists at \$17.98. There are regular sales; for instance, R&B and rap product went for \$14.99 throughout February in honor of Black History Month. Current major sellers include the latest albums by Snoop Dog, Jennifer Lopez, and Erykah Badu, as well as the soundtrack to the film *Save the Last Dance*.

Lawrence notes that Universal Music & Art Shop, which recently began reporting to SoundScan, is about to begin "more aggressive stocking" of CD and cassette singles. "We'll be tailoring our selection to radio airplay," he says, naming local R&B, top40/dance and Latin stations, such as WBBM (B96), WGCI, WVAZ, WKSC (Kiss 103.5), and WOJO as those whose playlists will serve as guides.

"Business hasn't been fabulous," Lawrence says candidly, "but we haven't been losing a whole lot of money." He notes that a "major concern" thus far is that "we've not been able to convince the big music labels to help us [via discounts]. We're not trying to make a killing here—just enough money to pump back into YSP's programs [so we can] keep training youth in customer service, retail, and entrepreneurship."

Lawrence says one of his smartest business moves was hiring Ella Bramwell as store manager and employee trainer. "Before Ella, I didn't have an effective manager," he says, noting that he couldn't be effective himself in that role, as he oversees 15 other YSP programs in addition to the Universal Music & Art Shop.

Bramwell, who was a marketing and sales rep for BMG Distribution's Chicago-area office and worked primarily with the labels Jive, LaFace, and RCA—and who had also formed her own independent sales and marketing company, Untamed Marketing—met Lawrence at a business conference last September. "He expressed an interest in furthering the development of the store," says Bramwell, "and I offered my assistance."

Since signing on, Bramwell has also been instrumental in bringing in guest instructors. For example, she's tapped BMG associates to teach store layout in anticipation of a physical redesign.

Students who intern at Universal Music & Art Shop are 16 to 18 years old and must maintain a C average—no Ds or Fs, says Lawrence. "We don't harbor kids cutting classes," he notes, adding that "most of the kids who've worked here have been great. We've only had to let a couple go."

Interns go through a six-week training period, which includes "learning the history and business of music in our computer lab," says Lawrence. The lab is located in a sizable back room of the store. Its current complement of eight computers is about to expand to 21, courtesy of DePaul University, says Lawrence.

A recording studio on the premises is also in the works, to teach kids the basics of the recording process. And, of course, a comprehensive background in working in retail is provided, from the "niceties of eye contact with customers" to working the point-of-sale system to marketing and inventory.

Interns, who typically work in the store for three months, are paid a stipend of \$5 per hour. "When we first opened, we tried to fund the store manager's salary and the stipends through store revenue alone," says Lawrence. "Now that end is funded by [Chicago philanthropic concern] Polk Bros. Foundation."

Odaliz Roman, 17, is one of Universal Music & Art's most successful interns, according to Lawrence. Roman says the experience taught her "how to work in a retail setting," knowledge she's put to work in subsequent retail employment.

"I learned how to treat customers the right way, and I learned a lot about music," she says, "I didn't want to leave—I'd like to work in a record store again."